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FARM PAPER LETTER

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WILL THERE BE ENOUGH TO EAT IN THE FUTURE? A USDA news story and a dinner plate have arrived on my desk to remind me that while the excitement about heavy farm debts is a grave matter to people in danger of losing their farms, agriculture has another problem that also may be crucial to our continued ability to feed millions of people. That problem is so obvious it sometimes is hard to see: Agriculture needs bright young minds. It needs them now.

THE NEWS STORY: Public and private institutions have launched a five-year project to reverse a decline in interest in the agricultural sciences when young people enroll in institutions offering degrees in food, agriculture, and natural resources.

On the team are the U.S. Department of Agriculture and 142 land grant and private colleges and universities, plus businesses and foundations.

"The critical issue is the steady erosion of enrollment in U.S. colleges of agriculture since 1978," said Dr. Terry B. Kinney, Jr., administrator of USDA's Agricultural Research Service, the agency that initiated planning in 1982 that led to the new project.

Edgar L. Kendrick, administrator of USDA's office of higher education programs, said the department is "enthusiastic about the project's direction and vigor, but changes in the system will not come overnight."

Kendrick said Richard H. Merritt of Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey, is project director. Training sessions for faculty will start in the spring of 1986. The project will require about five years to complete.

Areas targeted for improvements in college curricula include computer literacy, ethics and public policy, cultural and social aspects of domestic and international agricultural systems, internships, systems of integrated pest management for crop production, cooperative education, and student projects.

Funding efforts coordinated by the Rutgers Foundation have so far resulted in \$300,000 in grants from the Exxon Education Foundation, R.J. Reynolds Industries, Inc., the Upjohn Company, USDA and other supporters.

Kinney expressed concern about current shortages of scientific and professional personnel in food and agricultural sciences, particularly in the emerging areas of biotechnology and biological control of insects and weeds.

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"A major goal is to make education more responsive to the changing needs of society, especially U.S. agriculture, and more able to train students to solve present and future problems," he said.

For more information, call Hank Becker (301) 344-3547.

BACK TO THE DINNER PLATE: The plate was neatly packaged and accompanied by a letter from Cameron C. Dubes of the Future Farmers of America, a national organization chartered by Congress to help provide instruction in vocational agriculture through the nation's high schools.

Also in the package was a pamphlet. It asked, "Are we undermining America's food supply?"

The letter took no sides in the headline-grabbing farm policy issues we've read so much about lately. The FFA simply wants to reverse the tide of young people away from careers in agriculture.

Dubes said 1,000 of these plates were delivered to key people to bring attention to the need for more students in agriculture. Here are some of the facts, according to FFA:

Since 1980, enrollments in U.S. ag college programs have dropped by about 20%. Already, there are fewer graduates for the ag industry.

In the same time period, enrollment in high school vocational agriculture and the FFA has fallen about 50,000. Fewer people are getting basic skills training in agriculture.

Fewer graduate degrees have been conferred in most ag-related fields at major land grant universities. This means fewer technical, financial, and management resources for ag.

More teachers of agriculture are leaving their classrooms for industry, creating a new void in our ability to train new people.

The public has a narrow image of what agriculture is, and people don't understand that it's the nation's number one industry, employing 22% of U.S. workers. They don't realize it is more than just farming, that it's genetic engineering, bio-technology, computers, marketing and business management.

There is a hidden talent erosion occurring right now in agriculture, which could cause real concern in the future.

What does this mean? It means that if we don't have qualified people in agricultural careers, the one thing Americans take for granted -- our cheap food supply -- could be threatened in the future.

The condition of the dinner plates said something about whether we'll have enough to eat tomorrow if we fail to attract more of the bright young minds into agriculture. All 1,000 plates had been neatly and intentionally broken down the middle.

OUTLOOK GIVEN FOR EXPORTS, WHEAT, FRUIT Farm exports this fiscal year are expected to total \$35.5 billion, 7% below fiscal 1984's \$38 billion. U.S. wheat growers will cut back on production by about 5 million acres, or 6% from last year because of voluntary participation in government acreage reduction programs. Fruit prices received by growers and paid at the retail level are likely to rise in the next few months.

More details follow:

EXPORTS. Volume is forecast at 145.5 million tons, 1% above last year's 143.6 million.

Contributing to the reduced forecast are sluggish world demand for soybeans, lagging wheat sales and a continued shift away from U.S. corn in major Far Eastern markets. These developments have stemmed from the continued slow recovery from the 1982/83 world recession, record foreign production of most commodities and the continued strength of the U.S. dollar against foreign currencies.

The forecast for U.S. agricultural imports has been raised to \$19.5 billion. Thus, the agricultural trade surplus is projected at \$16 billion, down from \$19.1 billion in fiscal 1984.

For more information, call Steve MacDonald (202) 447-8841 or Dave Pendlum (202) 382-9148.

WHEAT. First indications for 1985 came last December, when U.S. winter wheat farmers said they had seeded only 57.6 million acres, down 9% from 1984 and the smallest since 1979.

An excessively wet fall limited wheat plantings in the South and East. While spring weather developments remain crucial, the current outlook suggests that 1985's wheat harvest may be between 2.4 and 2.6 billion bushels, close to 1984.

The 1985 wheat program calls for a 20% acreage reduction program and a 10% paid land diversion, which means growers who participate cannot harvest 30% of their farm's wheat acreage base. Those who comply with the requirements will get price protection of \$4.38 a bushel for their harvested acreage and will be eligible for a price support loan of \$3.30 a bushel.

Wheat supplies continue to be large. Reflecting accelerated early season exports and heavy use of wheat for livestock feeding, stocks on January 1, 1985, stood at 2.14 billion bushels, 8% lower than a year ago.

Although a strong dollar tends to limit foreign demand for U.S. grain, the burst of export loading in the first half of 1984/85 was exceeded only by the 1981/82 record. Exports to the USSR are likely to set a record. An extremely short 1984 harvest led the Soviets to expand their U.S. wheat purchases 2.5 times from a year ago. Competition by exporters in the Southern Hemisphere and the strong dollar point toward slowing U.S. wheat sales for the remainder of the year. Total 1984/85 exports may be only slightly higher than the 1.43 billion bushels of a year ago.

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Farm wheat prices fell 2 cents below the rate at harvest and rose to 16 cents above during the heavy export buying. Even if some unfavorable developments in the 1985 crop spark price boosts before the end of the year, this season's average farm price likely will be only 7 to 10 cents above the loan rate.

Global 1984 wheat output hit a record. While recent wheat harvest in the Southern Hemisphere may be down about 8% from a year earlier, larger crops in the major Northern Hemisphere countries helped lift world production to 514 million metric tons. Total output by major exporting nations was up 7% from a year ago.

For more information, call Allen Schienbein at (202) 447-8444.

FRUIT. Lower fruit prices will reflect seasonal decreases in apple and pear supplies and the reduced citrus crop due to the Florida freeze. Demand should remain strong because of the overall strength of the economy. Although the average grower price for fresh and processing fruit declined slightly for the third consecutive month this January, it still was 50% above a year earlier, mainly because of higher citrus prices.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' December 1984 Consumer Price Index for fresh fruit was 23% above a year ago. Higher prices for apples and oranges dominated the price increase. Also, higher prices for canned fruit and frozen concentrated orange juice have caused retail prices of processed fruit to remain moderately higher than a year ago.

For more information, call Ben Huang (202) 447-7290.

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